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# No Man's Land

LAURIE MATHEWS



**M**y main objective was to create stone and metal work that reflects my concern for the future of humanity, the natural world, and the unalterable interdependence between the two. Stone—with its natural grains and flaws that can be reduced through extensive polishing and refinement—can also act as a metaphor for the innate corruption of humans and their ability to right or redeem themselves. Stone, raw and unadulterated, forces me as an artist to work with nature in a tangible way and reinforces the message I hope to convey—the unalterable juxtaposition between humans and nature that can neither be denied nor ignored.

Working with stone also allows me to relinquish a certain degree of control over my work. With stone, I have to allow for unexpected flaws or cracks that may force revisions and alterations as I work. In my view, this unpredictable and tenuous quality acts as an asset not a hindrance, since it forces me to accept and work with aspects of the medium that I cannot change. Throughout the creative process, my aim is to stay open to any changes necessary as I work with a particular stone.

I find that, as I transfer from one medium to another, the work usually shifts and changes in response. In this work I transitioned between stone and metal. I like to explore ways to manipulate metal by using heat to create a patina or by using a plasma cutter to fragment the metal to the point of becoming almost threadbare. As I move back and forth between mediums, the work begins to speak to me in ways I had not anticipated when I first conceived of it in my mind. As a result, I find that it is vital for me as an artist to maintain a sense of openness to unexpected changes while working. Without that openness the artist may feel constricted, stifled, and uninspired—trapped into doing something that screams for abandonment or movement in another direction.

I find that one of the most exciting aspects of creating an art piece, especially a sculpted piece, is the point when the piece begins to take on a very clear and decisive form and a personality of its own. At that point, all that is left is the removal and refinement of excess material, allowing for the piece to become distinct and actualized. Very rarely have I created a complex work that has remained true to

its original idea or model. As a result, I am mindful of the wording in any artist statement, so that the statement leaves room for further interpretation or change of view. It should remain applicable and as true as possible over time, especially because art should be studied and viewed multiple times in order for one to fully experience and appreciate the subtleties, complexities, and distinctions involved. Continual analysis of the piece gives the viewer, along with the artist, the opportunity to relate to the piece on a deeper level of understanding. I know that I respond to a work more fully with repeat contact and viewing.

My hope is to produce work that reflects not only my current knowledge and skills, honed through my studies and personal experiences, but also my point of view about social and environmental issues. Due to early events in my life, I believe I have acquired sensitivity to the pain and suffering of others. As a child, I was forced to move from one location to another because of my father's job. By my final year in high school, I had attended over a dozen schools. As a rather shy and introverted child, a condition I still struggle to overcome, I often entertained myself by studying others as an outsider. In order to survive, I became something of an expert on picking up on subtle clues, such as fleeting glances and unspoken exchanges. I then began to incorporate these aspects of human exchanges in much of my art, which included portraits. I was especially drawn to a fleeting expression in someone's eyes that many times revealed the condition of the innermost self or soul. In my works of expressive portraiture, I have spent many years using pastels, watercolors, charcoal, mixed media, pen and ink, and pencil. My work has ranged from representational realism to abstractions and has involved experimentation with variations of depth, color, line, and shape in order to create a sense of expression or feeling. In such works my aim is to capture the essence of a person, a deeper version than the one out front.

While sculpting, I often find that the piece speaks to me. As it begins to take on a certain form, new ideas and feelings emerge and this adds new meaning that I had not originally considered. As I begin working on an organic piece, whether with stone or metal, I try

to work with the medium, not against it. I find that any peculiarities or inconsistencies in the material provide inspiration and add to its overall attractiveness. To me, this is one of the most exciting aspects of sculpting—developing a relationship with the piece as I work, exploring, refining, and redefining the piece. I am especially appreciative of the beautiful and natural characteristics of alabaster. Each piece includes infinite variations in color and translucence, in its deposits of salts and iron oxides, and in its veins and banding. The variations provide further inspiration and help to move me forward as I work.

My intention is to create both figurative and abstract pieces that contain elements of discomfort and incongruity. I attempt to translate in sculptural form a sense of imbalance and visual tension. I hope that my work becomes increasingly minimalist and abstract. Although detailed work—including transitioning from clay models to another medium, such as stone—allows me to develop my skills of observation, that kind of work is a great place to start, not to finish. Ultimately, my intent is to create only abstract rather than representational pieces.

The greatest challenge for me this year was to create work that allows the conscious mind to take a back seat to the unconscious. Too often in life all the blanks are filled in, leaving nothing to the imagination. I like the challenge of working with stone since this medium allows for the creation of elegant, graceful, and flowing lines. The organic and swelling shapes that stone produces can attract and seduce the senses of the viewer. Incorporating swelling shapes and fluid elements works to draw in the viewer in order to deliver any kind of message the piece might convey to them. As an artist, I am motivated by a sense of personal and global responsibility as I work, and I hope that some of these feelings are translated into each piece I create. These concerns include the need for the protection of the earth's air and water and a need to look more closely at the plight of humanity, as we become increasingly invisible and voiceless in today's world.

I derive inspiration in my work through various artists, including Maya Lin, Ernst Barlach, Kathe Kollwitz, Pablo Picasso,

and Umberto Boccioni, as well as from writers and musicians such as Isaac Bashevis Singer, John Steinbeck, David Gray, Citizen Cope, and many others. Listening to music is essential as I work. I am usually keyed in to one musician at a time, listening to an entire body of a work over and over again until my piece of art is completed. Music has a way of keeping me in a certain mindset or mood that acts to drive ideas and ensure that I stay focused and inspired.

I find contemporary sculptor and architect Maya Lin's work notable due to her innate sensitivity to the subtle textures, flow of lines, and purity of forms that are found in nature—forms that are simple, elegant and graceful. Her work is not didactic, but rather it appeals to human beings' primal attraction to all that is sublime and truthful in the natural world. In her autobiography, *Maya Lin: Boundaries*, Lin explains, "In choosing to make works that do not force a set opinion or message forward but present facts that allow viewers to come to their own conclusions—creating meditative spaces that seem almost too subtle in their design, yet have a quiet teaching method or approach—I recognize a distinctly Asian influence" (Lin 503). Lin's work inspires me in much the same way. It helps me to appreciate the simplicity and minimalism found in nature that I also hope to communicate through any art that I produce. I am attracted to abstractions, rather than actual representations where everything is spelled out. An artist shouldn't have to connect all the dots for the viewer. I am always striving and searching for ways to express my point of view through this minimalist approach to art. In my view, art should be open-ended, always leaving room for changing views and interpretations that usually become increasingly complex over time.

Lin's vision involves seeing nature as a whole and sometimes the disturbing loss of an essential part of nature. In her exhibit *Here and There*, she creates a white Vermont Danby marble carving entitled *Disappearing Bodies of Water* that depicts the Arctic ice mass, Lake Chad, and the Aral Sea. In this piece, she attempts to show gradual changes in this body of water over time: "The shape of each layer of marble is derived from the satellite image of the shrinking mass of the body of water. As climate change accelerates, Lin is increasingly interested in rising currents and changes at the

water's edge" ("Maya Lin" 2). Currently, Lin is working on what she calls her "last memorial," entitled *What's Missing?* It is a ten-year, multi-sited project that has brought art into the twenty-first century through the use of the website [www.whatismissing.net](http://www.whatismissing.net). According to a Pace London press release, the website "...acts as a nexus for the project, creating an ecological history of the planet and inviting people to share something they have personally witnessed diminish significantly or disappear from the natural world" ("Maya Lin" 2).

Through the website, Lin engages the viewer in a way that is unprecedented by asking the viewer to log on and report environmental changes that are occurring in neighborhoods and communities throughout the world. Her approach to the environment seems to mirror my own philosophy, that one person can change the world and that no voice is too small to be heard. Lin takes art and environmental activism to a new level, through the use of the Internet as an essential tool. This gives her work immediacy and intimacy, through the documentation of changes in the earth's ecology as they occur and by instilling a personal sense of responsibility in the individuals viewing the change. Lin's *What's Missing* project allows community activists, such as myself, to provide a piece of evidence about a problem that might otherwise have gone unnoticed or been dismissed by the casual observer.

My artistic journey also involves a sense of social responsibility, as well as an environmental one. I have been greatly influenced by Expressionist works, especially German Expressionism as depicted in the work of German sculptor Ernst Barlach. Barlach's work portrays human suffering in the face of war and its aftermath. His dynamic figures, often carved in wood, depict exaggerated gestures. The figures are also highly stylized—with geometric patterns of dress and very detailed faces and hands—and are shockingly lifelike and powerful. Barlach's work creates a sense of both drama and movement, as he successfully captures the emotional aftermath of war and its psychological and physical tolls on its victims. Before leaving Germany, Barlach was portrayed as one of Germany's "degenerate" artists by Adolph Hitler. His work was cited in Hitler's "Munich Degenerate Art Exhibition" as an example of

immorality and the antithesis of Nazi ideology, and 381 of his works were removed from exhibition in German museums (Lucie-Smith 75).

The universal human experience of suffering transcends both time and space. In Herschel Chipp's journal article, "German Expressionism in Los Angeles," he states, "There are also, inevitably, the metamorphoses in the highly personal modes of expression of these [German Expressionist] artists, who are so acutely sensitive to the changing pressures of social struggles" (Chipp 2). In my work I also hope to capture a contemporary social awareness and heightened sensitivity to the suffering of others as it is experienced on a personal level. These forces act to inspire and drive my vision. As an undergraduate student of art, I am sometimes required to move backward in order to move forward. I am expected to provide, in an academic sense, evidence of my understanding of form, especially human form. Although abstract work is my ultimate goal, initially I must prove my competency and skill as an artist in the traditional sense.

As a case in point, Pablo Picasso's initial representational work is a sharp contrast to his later work. In Pierre Daix's book, *Picasso: Life and Art*, Picasso is described as a child prodigy: "... visiting an exhibition of children's drawing with Antonina Vallentin, Picasso told her that at twelve he could not have entered the show, because by then, he already 'drew like Raphael.' Today we have proof of that remark" (Daix 6). Although Pablo Picasso's work is now so well known that some may consider it a cliché, I feel that his work is still very relevant today and a source from which I continue to draw inspiration. I am inspired by Picasso's imaginative diversity and playfulness and his manipulation of space, line, and color. Partly due to a lifelong exposure to his very popular Cubist paintings, his work has had a strong influence on my way of seeing and working with clay and other malleable mediums. I have long been drawn to his simple and minimalist style. I find his freshness and originality to be unmatched by most of today's contemporary artists. His work also inspires me to strive to find my own voice and view so that I have something new to depict and say.



Although a great source of inspiration for much of my work has been the art and ideas of the past, I am constantly searching for new sources of inspiration. My goal is to move forward as an artist and not allow myself to be stuck with what is familiar and comfortable but, instead, to challenge myself, take risks, and possibly fail. Complacency is not acceptable to me. The artists I most admire are those who have pushed beyond societal norms and self-imposed limits in order to create something new, something wonderfully exciting, and sometimes, something painfully true.

The methods, materials, and ideas of past and present artists, especially sculptors, have provided me with both knowledge and inspiration. In his book, *Living Masters: A Sculptor's Handbook*, Oliver Andrews says "Stone has been used for sculpture for thousands of years. Although it may seem today to be eclipsed by the dazzling array of modern materials, it still holds a fascination for some of the most creative contemporary sculptors" (Andrews 107). As I begin to explore stone as my primary medium of choice, I begin to appreciate its versatility and its unique, natural features. Although I enjoy working with the mediums of paint and pen and ink, stone speaks to me in a way that is different from the other mediums. I was first introduced to stone carving during my second year at Bridgewater State University. Although I sometimes find the hand tools involved in working with stone to be difficult and cumbersome—using angle and die grinders and a wide variety of one-quarter-inch carbide bits—I am hooked on everything associated with the medium.

As long as I can remember, I have had a fascination with stones and rocks. While at the shore, I can spend hours collecting and examining stones, noting how they change after the tide rushes in, compared to how they look when they are baking in the sun. I love studying their various patterns and colors, and running my hands over their smooth textures and shapes. When I was a child, my mother gave me her collection of rocks, left over from a university geology class. This collection was soon to be one of my greatest treasures, each rock labeled and classified according to its physical properties. My favorites were those that had embedded crystals that would shimmer as you held them up to the light.

Stone sculpture, one of the oldest art forms known to humankind, tells the tale of ancient civilizations and how the creative spirit has endured through time. Although I appreciate the historical significance of ancient art and feel that it's a relevant part of my work, modern sculpture, which had its beginnings between World War I and World War II, is where I focus most of my attention. I have been influenced by German Expression, Futurism, and Cubism and by artists such as Kathe Kollwitz, Ernst Barlach, Alberto Boccioni, Jacques Lipchitz, Picasso, Henri Moore, Constantin Brancusi, Jean Arp, and Maya Lin.

German Expressionist artists Ernst Barlach and Kathe Kollwitz lived in an atmosphere of constant threats as they worked. As Hitler rose to power in the 1930s, artists who opposed his views lived in constant fear. They not only feared for their safety, but also feared that their work, which included war memorials and other public sculptures, would be destroyed. Barlach, on a national radio show called "Artists on Their Times," defended artistic freedom just days before Hitler was appointed German Chancellor. According to the book, *An Artist Against the Third Reich: Ernst Barlach, 1933-1938*, "Barlach called attention to the conflict between two races – a conflict 'as old as the world' and demanded, 'in defiantly outspoken partisanship,...that those pushed into a corner be given freedom to breathe'" (Paret 23).

Barlach worked with a variety of mediums, but according to Paret, he "...liked to sculpt by carving directly from wood, and in his forties he took up the woodcut as a favored medium – both methods often associated with 'primitive art' – and contributed to the expressionist attribution..." (25). However, Paret said that Barlach was not comfortable with the term "expressionist": "As a classification of a phase in the history of art, expressionism has value; but the term is subject to too many qualifications and exceptions to be of much use as an interpretive device. Calling Barlach an expressionist has not added to the understanding of his work – nor, perhaps, to the understanding of expressionism" (26).

During a 1937 exhibition of "degenerate art" in Germany, sponsored by Hitler as an assault on avant-garde German artists,

Barlach's sculpture *The Reunion* was selected in order to publicly humiliate him (28). Although much of Barlach's work is figurative, the pieces seem to propel themselves forward into space and almost linger there, as if anticipating something dire that is soon to take place. The sharp geometric forms, found in the figure's robes and cloaks, add to this sense of movement and dynamism, something often seen in Futurist paintings.

Paret paraphrases a man named Walter Hinderer, who had noted of Barlach that his sculptures were "...characterized by a combination of abstraction and imagery, by the idealization of reality. The realistic element of the particular is reduced so that the artist can formulate a general truth..." (28). Barlach's figurative sculptures, especially his woodcarvings, seem to portray the essence of "common" people facing a future of fear and uncertainty. At the same time, Barlach also manages to reveal the innate resilience and enduring inner strength of people during such times.

In the book Jacques Lipchitz: *The First Cubist Sculptor*, author Catherine Putz writes of Picasso that his "...sculptural constructions were driven by a fascination with structure which sculptors had no need to emulate: it was already part of their craft, intuitively apprehended as much as learnt. More important was the impetus cubist painting gave to sculpture before the First World War toward developing an infinitely variable language, one that could suggest a more complex experience of the world than could traditional artistic practices" (Putz 10).

The minimalist shapes and forms, associated with ancient artwork and dating back to pre-Columbian times, heavily influenced many avant-garde sculptors in the first half of the twentieth century. They were also inspired by African wood masks and began producing carvings that veered from traditional representative work and moved toward more abstract representations. In her book *Contemporary Stone Sculpture: Aesthetics Methods Appreciation*, Dona Z. Meilach says, "An important idea in the development of sculpture was [Henri] Moore's concept of penetrating the material and opening up the sculptured mass. Now sculpture not only penetrated space, but space also penetrated the sculpture. He brought solids and voids into

equal and harmonic balance" (Meilach 18). Artists such as Moore, Arp, Brancusi, and Lipchitz, among others, began to revolutionize sculpture in a way that is still relevant and appreciated today. Their vision was one of unadulterated form, and their sensitivity to spatial relationships helped propel art in a new direction at a time when contemporary sculpture's very existence was in peril.

Today, artists such as Maya Lin also use their art to send a message to the viewer. In some of Lin's most recent work, modern technology comes screaming to the forefront. She implements global mapping, GPS tracking, and an interactive website as important elements of some of her most recent and compelling work. According to a 2013 press release by Pace London, the fourteen foot-long marble sculpture *Greenwich Mean Time* represents the cartographic section of the Greenwich Meridian, the parallel passing through London at zero degrees longitude. To create the sculpture, Lin began with drawings...followed by computer analysis and scaled models to find the right form... "I start with extremely complex scientific data points and then, through a visual editing process, I find the scale and simplicity of the form—revealing a landscape both visually discernable and compelling." ("Maya Lin" 2)

Lin's latest work includes aerial views of disappearing bodies of water, taken from satellite images and three-dimensional modeling, in order to show depth and area as well as temporal changes that are occurring on the planet at a steady rate. She seems to question whether these changes are permanent and, if so, whether they will worsen. Lin also incorporates materials such as steel pins, liquid recycled silver, and marble in many of these pieces. In a quote from the Pace London Lin explains that "If the end form looks only like the idea of the information, then it fails. It has to become its own form—evocative, beautiful, strange" ("Maya Lin" 2).

Although many of the artists I have discussed lived in different time periods and faced different challenges, they were linked by an overwhelming desire to reach beyond what is known and to explore the unknown, even in the face of being publicly ridiculed. Contemporary artists such as Maya Lin are also finding a way to merge science and technology with art. They are creating sculptural

works that visually depict what many choose to ignore. They are making a strong appeal to our senses and our collective conscience. And they are reminding us of what is important and what is really happening.

As an artist, I look forward to the challenges that lie ahead in the search for new and richer meanings in my life and in the world of art. Although I may be considered a quiet and soft-spoken person, I am someone with strong opinions as well as deep convictions and concern for others. I hope to use art as a fluid platform for expressing these personal views and insights. In my work with metal, stone, and other mediums, I am moving toward a place where I will be free to explore limitless possibilities and challenges—to a place of vision and purpose. My ultimate goal is to create work that challenges the viewer to see things in a new way, or at least that poses questions and concerns about the world and the people around us.

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## About the Author

Laurie Mathews is a graduating senior majoring in Art with concentrations in Fine Arts/Sculpture and Art Education. She is looking forward to a future in art education as well as continued work in sculpture and mixed media. Her alabaster stone projects were completed in the 2014-2015 academic year under the guidance of Professor Ryan Collins.